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ABSTRACT

Encouragement is a very effective means of enhancing appropriate behavior in others. Before one can be encouraging, one must recognize how people discourage others through verbalizations, actions, attitudes, beliefs, one's position in the family, and school. Schools discourage students through expectations, grades, report cards, competition, teacher's reprimands that a student "can do better," sibling comparisons, and emphasizing mistakes. In order to be encouraging, one should avoid praise that emphasizes the speaker rather than the listener/doer and grandiose value judgments rather than the effort of the individual. It would also be helpful to avoid nagging, listing all the "don'ts," feeling sorry for children, and saying "that's great, but..." There are three basic types of encouragement: verbal, gestural, and situational. Effective verbal encouragement, oral or written, must emphasize the listener/doer and his efforts. Gestural encouragement refers to all the physical touching and motioning that one does to acknowledge the worth of someone else. The primary concern with gestural encouragement is to use gestures appropriate to the individual. In situational encouragement, one creates a situation that will be encouraging to someone else, for example, by asking for help or giving responsibility. To be a successful encourager, one must be willing to be encouraging, be willing to practice, and must keep oneself encouraged. (NRB)

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ENCOURAGEMENT: A PROCESS FOR ALL SEASONS

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Encouragement: A Process For All Seasons

Encouragement is one of the single most effective means we have for enhancing appropriate behavior in others. It is a process which anyone and everyone can use at some time.

Before we can employ the process of encouragement we must first understand the concept of discouragement. Discouragement is a more complex concept than Webster's Dictionary might lead us to believe. For our purpose we will define discouragement as any inappropriate behavior by a person. The assumption is that the person has not been able to find their niche in life through a positive means and therefore has switched to the easier negative side of behavior.

This brings us to two assumptions that are basic to the Adlerian model and the process of encouragement.

(1) Everyone's primary goal in life is to belong. All behavior and all actions are viewed as moving the individual towards the goal of belonging.

(2) All behavior is purposive. All behavior is viewed as having a purpose and that purpose is to enhance our belonging.

This second assumption, all behavior is purposive, is of major importance. If one listens to a casual conversation, overhears a heated argument or even reads material by a learned scholar, one may come to the conclusion that behavior is caused. As a result, people make many statements to the effect that thus-and-so "made" me angry or so-and-so "made" me do this or do that. We appear to be a society very anxious to place the blame for our mistakes or inappropriate behavior on something or someone else. Certainly many sociologists and psychologists expend a great deal of energy trying to find the "causes" of a great variety of behaviors. Parents, neighbors, schools,

drugs, alcohol, spouses, siblings, the weather, and phase of the moon are just a few of the entities blamed for a variety of occurrences.

The reality, of course, is that we make a variety of choices. We choose to be angry, or we choose to be sad or happy. We choose to get married or divorced. We choose to control our temper or not. No one makes us lose control, we choose to.

The concept of choice and purposiveness is very important to the process of encouragement. Only if we acknowledge our own power to control our lives will we be able to ultimately do those things for ourselves that allow us to achieve a sense of belonging. Only if we believe we have the power to control our own behavior can we expect others to control or change their behavior.

Oftentimes when we have exhausted our "causes" for behavior, we turn to the concept of "randomness." "I guess it just happened." "Randomness" is also a means of avoiding responsibility. If my, or someone else's, behavior is inexplicable, then how can I possibly be held accountable. Both "randomness" and "causes" demean the individual. They imply that the individual is powerless to influence their environment and control their own behavior. This is very discouraging.

As stated earlier, before one can be encouraging one first must understand discouragement and recognize how we sometimes discourage others, often quite unintentionally. The following is a list of categories of discouragement with specific examples cited for each category.

1. Verbalizations to others. We have a wide variety of common phrases which we often use without giving the meaning and impact much thought. Some examples: "You're too little.", "I'll do it for you.", "Won't you ever learn?", "How many times do I have to tell you?" and "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times.".

When these phrases fail to display sufficient disgust, we often resort to labels such as "dumb" or "stupid". Combined with the phrases and words we use to discourage is the tone of voice. Frequently, the tone of voice conveys more of our actual feelings and intent than the words themselves. A person may use all the "proper or correct" words while at the same time use a tone of voice which conveys a meaning totally opposite of the words.

When all else fails to express our disgust, we sigh. The words did not make the point nor did the tone. Therefore we sigh. The person we are addressing is so far beyond hope all we can do is sigh. There are no words to express my total displeasure.

2. Actions and attitudes towards others. One common action we display toward others, especially children, that is supposed to encourage but actually discourages is overprotection. Any time we do something for someone else that they could and should do for themselves, we are discouraging. The message conveyed to the person being helped is, "Even though you are old enough, big enough, smart enough or competent enough to handle this task, I am going to do it for you because you probably will make a mess of it or not do it as well as I believe it should be done." This certainly is not an encouraging message. Fourteen year old children can usually butter their own toast.

Another example in this category is the action of assuming the worst about someone. This can lead to the person being "blamed" deciding that since they are being blamed they might as well go ahead and commit the deed. Probably most people can recall as a child, being blamed for something they did not do and the feelings of frustration, hurt or anger that followed. Assuming the worst can often lead to the

person fulfilling our expectations. Related to assuming the worst is assuming someone can not handle a given situation. The adult or person in charge may be trying to protect the other person, but in the process demeans the child or fellow worker. The reality is that often a child or other person can handle the situation or task in a very adequate manner. In order to grow and mature, people must have the opportunity. When venturing into new tasks or territories, support may be needed but not overprotection.

3. Beliefs. Our belief system colors and effects everything we do and say. One of the most discouraging belief systems we display are prejudices. Any woman or minority race member can relate a variety of examples of how they have been discouraged by the prejudicial attitudes of others. To be discriminated against because of your sex or race, which you have little or no control over, is most discouraging. In this same category it is important to recognize that there are prejudicies other than sexual and racial. The beliefs that all children are ready for reading on a certain prescribed date, that if people are laughing in the restroom something "bad" is taking place, and that children from certain families are "always" bad are some other prejudicies that exist. Obviously, the list of discouraging beliefs is much longer and could go on for some time.
4. Position in the Family (Family Constellation). With each position in the family constellation the potential exists for discouragement. The oldest child may become discouraged if he/she does not perceive himself as first or best. They may also become discouraged if another sibling outperforms them in some manner, usually academic. The second child may be discouraged due to a perception that he/she can

never catch up to the oldest. They may see themself as a perpetual second-class citizen.

The middle of three children (squeeze child) may be discouraged due to his/her oldest, competent, well-behaved older sibling and cute, younger sibling. No matter how good he/she becomes, the oldest is always better, and the younger is always cuter. The youngest child may be discouraged due to all the other siblings being older and more proficient. The youngest may feel incompetent due to a lack of initial size and skill. There are other aspects of family constellation that are discouraging that can be elaborated on at a different time.

5. School. Schools and school systems occupy a unique position in the area of discouragement. Schools have the potential for creating more discouragement than almost any other situation or person.
   a. Expectations. Expectations that are either too high or too low can lead to discouragement. While reasonably high expectations are highly encouraging, if they are too high the opposite effect occurrs. A person may decide not to try at all if he/she believes the standards are out of reach. At the other end of the spectrum is having expectations that are too low. The individual may believe that there is no point in putting forth any effort if that is all the teacher/parent expects of them. The student may believe the teacher has a very low opinion of them if that is all the teacher expects.
   b. Grades. For anyone that has received a grade of D or F, the statement that grades are discouraging is not much of a revelation. Even C's, which are supposedly average, can not really be considered encouraging. The probability is that the pupils that need the

smallest amount of encouragement are getting the A's and B's. The children that are the most discouraged are getting the D's and F's. The old "refrigerators for Eskimos" problem. Those in need get none and those that do not need get more than necessary. One solution is to decrease the emphasis on grades. While grades are sometimes a "necessary evil" the importance placed on them can be decreased. In addition, some teachers may be using letter grades when it is not necessary. All school districts require that teachers report their student's progress. Some of the more enlightened districts do not specify how the progress is to be reported. This presents the opportunity for innovative teachers to create other means for reporting pupil growth. For example, one teacher decided to administer standardized tests at the beginning and end of each grading period. She thus ascertained the amount of growth in years and/or months each child had gained. Since people do not usually un-learn material, she was virtually always able to report progress. It is obviously more encouraging to talk about growth rather than a low letter grade.

c. Report Cards. "It isn't bad enough my teacher tells me all semester how dumb I am, now its officially passed all around the school and to my parents!" Report cards make it official. It is now permanently recorded how poorly the child does in school. Report cards have the potential to be utilized in an encouraging manner. Many report cards have space to write comments concerning the student. If this space was reserved for positive comments, report cards, to some degree, could be more encouraging. The problem is teachers often times appear

to feel compelled to write something negative about the child. It appears as if the teacher believes he/she is not doing their job unless some type of negative comment is made.

d. Competition. To argue against competition between children may be like arguing against apple pie and motherhood. The problem with competition between children in a classroom is that ultimately you can have only one winner. So what is wrong with one winner? The other 29 to 34 losers. We do not need more losers. We already have more than enough discouraged children that do not read, do not perform in math and expend their energies on misbehaving. In addition, many children will not make any attempt to compete because they know ahead of time they can not possibly win. The number of "losers" produced by interpersonal competition far out number the "winners". Does this mean all competition is undesirable? No. Intrapersonal competition is highly desirable. Trying to do better than you did last time on a task can be very productive. This is a healthy competition because you are competing with someone that you are sure you can beat - yourself. We all know we can improve our performance. By competing with yourself, and not someone else, you know you can be successful. If you have to beat someone else to be good enough and have selfworth you are in trouble. No matter how good you are now or will be in the future, sooner or latter someone will come along that is better. This is shown by all record books. Regardless of who is better, one can always be proud of ones own improvement.

Intrapersonal competition can be used in all the same settings

as interpersonal competition. It can be employed in both academics and athletics. Any athlete can work to improve any aspect of their performance - time, shooting, blocking, hitting, passing, throwing, etc. Likewise, any student can work to improve their performance - more math problems solved, more spelling words correct, better grammer, improved test scores in any area. It is important that we move away from the "better than someone else" concept of competition and towards improving of ones own performance. That is how we can produce more winners.

e. "You can do better." This commonly used phrase is one of our more insidious statements used with students. It is meant to encourage but in fact often discourages. The "truth" is, one can never do better than one has done at any given point in time. With more practice, more training, more time, a better breakfast or fewer personal problems one might improve ones performance. With an improved mental attitude a person may perform better. The problem is, at the moment of performance one or several of the above listed factors may have been present. So, at that point in time the individual performed to the best of their ability.

As a college freshman English student, I received a number of 500-word essays back that my instructor had covered in blood red ink. Often written somewhere on the paper was the dreaded phrase, "You can do better!" I do not believe so. I had already spent half the night and destroyed two dictionaries producing the essay. She had my very best effort for that time and place. Certainly, many years, much more formal

training, a great deal more experience and maturity later, I can do better. But at that point in time, she received the best I could produce. Her comment, "You can do better." had no encouraging effect at all. In fact, it was most discouraging.

f. Sibling comparisons. It is most discouraging to be compared with another sibling when inevitably the other child did better. Based on what we know about family constellations and the fact that first borns in a family usually perform the best, all the children that follow will come out second best in many comparisons. The intent may be to spur the younger sibling to greater effort but if he/she has already decided they can not over take the older sibling then they are doomed to failure. All that will result is a more discouraged sibling.

It is even desirable, if at all possible, to avoid having siblings take the same teachers as they progress through the grades. If the same teachers can be avoided then the comparisons may decrease.

g. Emphasizing mistakes. Last on this particular list is the time honored practice of telling students how wrong they are. Not right, but wrong. The practice of identifing incorrect responses probably goes back to a desire for efficiency. Most students get more correct than incorrect, hense forth, less marking is necessary. There may also be a few teachers that trully enjoy telling students how WRONG they are. After all, what better way to feel superior than by telling students about all the mistakes they have made.

We have known for years that more can be gained by emphasizing the positive rather than the negative. The behavioral scientists have proved this over and over for many years. In spite of

this information we in education have insisted on following the least effective method of improving performance. If we wish to improve performance we must encourage what the child can do, not what he/she can not do.

A first step towards emphasizing what a child can do is to mark on papers those examples that are correct. This can be done with a simple "C" by each correct effort. This can be followed by placing the number correct at the top of the page as opposed to the traditional number wrong. This change in emphasis can have a dramatic positive effect on the pupil's performance.

Before we go on and discuss other aspects of encouragement/discouragement, a short list of words and/or actions to avoid would be useful.

1. Avoid praise. This may sound a little strange as most educators and helping type people over the years have been taught that praise is a desirable commodity. In comparison to belittling someone or being sarcastic, it is more desirable. However, there are two primary drawbacks to praise: (1) It places the major emphasis on the speaker rather than on the listener or receiver, and (2) It tends to emphasize rather grandiose value judgements rather than emphasizing the effort of the individual.

   Praise as it is usually stated emphasizes the speaker; "Mom is so proud of you!", "Teacher is glad you turned in your assignment."; "I am pleased with your grades."; "I have never seen a better paper.". In each of these examples the speaker is the person being emphasized not the person performing the task. The above statements could be improved in the following manner: "You must be proud of yourself!"; "You must feel good about getting your

assignment completed."; "You must be proud of your grades."; "It appears you worked very hard on your paper.". In each of the preceeding examples we have emphasized the doer rather than the speaker. This change in focus is very important if we wish to train children to take pride in their own efforts and accomplishments as opposed to doing things just to please teachers or parents. It is nice to have children do things to please us but from a long term developmental point of view this is highly undesirable.

As stated, praise also tends to include rather grandiose value judgements. Statements such as "That is the best paper I've even seen!"; "I have never watched a better game!"; "That is a fantastic story!"; "That is the best test ever written at this school!". In each of these statements the case is probably over stated. Statements of this nature may be very difficult to believe. If one does believe the statements then they may have a tough act to follow. In either case, real encouragement has not taken place.

A further problem with praise is its restricted usability. It can only be used <u>after</u> an event or action has taken place and only if the outcome is <u>near-perfect</u> or <u>perfect</u>. One can not praise before or during an event and one certainly can not praise failure. Encouragement, however can be used at all times - before, during and after; excellent outcomes, average results or failure. We will come back to the process later.

2. Stop nagging. Over the years I have asked classes, audiences, workshop groups, etc. how many enjoy being nagged. I also have asked these groups how many of them have changed their behavior due to the nagging. I get about the same response. If you stop and think about it you probably realize how futile nagging is.

Then why do we do it? Probably because it enables us to feel as if we are doing something about what we perceive as an undesirable situation. It is an easy way to feel you have taken some corrective action.

3. Do not list all the "don'ts." In other words, do not do what I am doing at this time. There are two reasons to avoid listing all the "don'ts". First, by listing all the "don'ts" you may give someone a new idea. A new way to misbehave that they have never thought of before.

   Second, when you list all the "don'ts" the listener may believe they have a "license" to do anything you do not list. Obviously one can not possibly list all the "don'ts" so the door is left open to engage in any behavior not identified.

4. Stop feeling sorry for children. No matter how disastrous a situation may be for a child, feeling sorry will not remedy or alter the difficulty. Feeling sorry for an individual will not cure the child's broken leg, their parent's alcoholism or bring a deceased relative back to life. In addition to not altering an unfortunate situation, feeling sorry for the child may lead the child to believe they should feel sorry for themselves. If that is the case they may do very little to overcome their difficulties. After all, if the adult is feeling sorry for the child, there may, in the child's mind, be good reason to feel sorry for themself and not work towards overcoming the problem.

5. Avoid saying "... that's great, but ...". Anytime a statement is made, often times a compliment, followed by "but", everything that preceeds the "but" is negated. "That's a nice looking blouse, but what happened to your hair?" The person does not hear how

nice the blouse looks. All they hear is their "terrible" hair.

Don't take away what you have given.

After all the lists of discouragement and what not to do and what to avoid, how do we encourage? There are three categories of encouragement to look at one at a time.

The first type of encouragement is verbal. This can be either oral or written. This is probably the most common and therefore easiest for us to use. There is a large array of verbal encouragements we can use. We do need to keep in mind two principles when using verbal encouragement. First, emphasize the listener/receiver, not the speaker. Second, recognize the effort or actual deed done rather than making some type of overstated value judgement. Some examples are:

"It looks like you are working hard on the project."

"You got to work quickly. Good for you!"

"You are half way done. Keep going."

"You must be proud of the job you have done."

"Hang in there!"

"Stay with it!"

"Try again."

"Your grade indicates you have a good understanding of this topic."

"Nice move!"

"Good effort."

As you can see there is a large variety of ways to state verbal encouragement. Please note that in the examples no mention is made of Mom , Dad or Teacher. The emphasis is on the listener/doer. Also, no excessive value judgements are made. Emphasis is on the action or deed that was completed or attempted. The effort rather than perfection or success was emphasized.

All of the above statements can be either oral or written. Many teachers have found that these types of statements written on student's papers are highly encouraging. Yes, it does take a little more time but the outcome is well worth the effort.

Letters and notes sent home are another example of verbal encouragement. Encouragement letters/notes sent home not only encourage the student but have the added benefit of encouraging the parents. If you have ever worked with parents you realize that parents often have as great a need for encouragement as do their children. An important factor in sending home notes to parents is to keep them positive. Most parents are aware of their children's shortcomings. We do not need to keep reminding them. We need to build on the positive aspects of each child.

Once again this does take some time. A couple of shortcuts can be used. (1) Keep the note short. There is no need to write a 500 word theme. Find the nice thing to say, state it and close the note. (2) Create a form letter. All you have to fill in are the parent's and child's names and a short line. One teacher even created complimentary categories to check so she did not even have to write a line.

Do positive notes sent home help? Try it and watch the reaction!

What school levels? All levels. All students and parents need encouragement.

One other form of verbal encouragement that has proven very effective is telephone calls to parents. The purpose of the call is to inform the parent of some positive aspect of the child's performance or behavior. No criticism is to be included. Parents are often times shocked to receive a positive phone call from school. It is so traditional that all communication from school to home is negative that parents are dumbfounded when the conversation focuses on the positive. It is fun to convince parents

their children have done well on some aspect of their school experience.

The second type of encouragement is gestural. Gestural encouragement is composed of all the pyhsical touching and motioning that one does to acknowledge the worth of someone else. Actions such as hugs, winks, nods, smiles, squeezes and pats on the back fall in this category. Even nothing more sophisticated than eye contact can be encouraging.

The primary concern with gestural encouragement is to use the best chosen gesture with the appropriate person. Hugs and pats are very effective with primary children but if you are a thirty year old male working in a high school and start hugging and patting the young ladies, you may lose your job and/or land in jail. What is accepted by one age and sex group may not be by another. One must choose their gestures carefully. With this in mind it is also important to keep in mind the cultural values of those you are trying to encourage. What one person may find encouraging, someone from a culturally different background may find embarrassing or discouraging.

One of the nice aspects of gestural encouragement is its spontaneity and flexibility. You can clap your hands, smile or pat someone on the shoulder without giving it much thought. You can smile or wink at someone from across the room without having to say a word.

The final type of encouragement is situational. This is when the encourager (parent, teacher, friend) creates a situation that will be encouraging to someone else. One fairly easy way to achieve this is by asking for help. Young children very much enjoy "helping" significant adults. An important factor to keep in mind is to accept the "help" without correction or qualification.

Another important type of situational encouragement is to give responsibility. Giving someone responsibility demonstrates respect and faith in that individual. Whether it be asking a small child to carry a

note or an adult to give a speech, both demonstrate respect and faith. Few actions are as encouraging as providing a needed service for someone that is highly thought of and respected. All of us can probably remember the warm glow we had after performing some task for a person we thought highly of or wanted badly to impress. It was certainly a very encouraging feeling.

To be a successful encourager you must do several things:

1. Be willing to be encouraging. Not only to children but also to family members, friends and people at work. Even bosses need encouragement.
2. Be willing to practice. If you do not try the action of encouraging you never will learn how. Sometimes it feels a bit awkward to begin with. As you practice more it starts to feel better. A little like learning to drive a standard shift car. With practice you improve.
3. Keep yourself encouraged. It is most difficult, if not impossible, to encourage someone else if you are discouraged. You, therefore, have to assume responsibility of keeping yourself encouraged. You have a multitude of positive aspects about yourself. Don't forget them.

As I hope you see, encouragement is a process for all seasons, all time and all people. We never out grow our need to be encouraged and to encourage others. After all, what is more encouraging than encouraging someone else.

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